SOUNDS & STORIES
The Musical Life of Maryland's African-American Communities

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Charles Funn

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Q: So can you just start from the very beginning, your name, where you grew up?

Funn: Oh, okay. My name is Charles Funn. I'm not originally from Baltimore. I was born and raised in southern Maryland, a place called Prince Frederick in Calvert County. I left there to come to Baltimore to go to Morgan State College at that time. I got my degree, came out of Morgan, and I've been teaching music ever since. I've been involved in the playing community of Baltimore. I've been fortunate enough to hook up with the right people to basically be happy and making somewhat of a living playing my instrument and teaching school.

I've been fortunate enough to play behind Sammy Davis, Jr., Billy Eckstine, the Temptations, the Four Tops, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, not to mention a lot of the people who I listened to growing up on things that's called records. That's those big things that were made out of plastic.

My oldest brother told me a while back, and I never actually realized it, he said, you've been fortunate enough to basically play with everybody that you used to listen to on the records around the house. Like Hank Jones, Ernie Wilkins, Ernie Andrews. So I have been blessed.

And I've been fortunate enough to work with a lot of the musicians in town who are the basic fountains of information. People like Roy McCoy, Jimmy Wells, Tracy McCleary, Gene Walker. I've been fortunate in that I've been able to start a lot of people on what you would call their musical trail as far as playing is concerned.

A gentleman out on the West Coast, his name is Jonathan Barnes. He's involved in studios out there and he's teaching music. Gary Thomas went to Poly for one year. So I've been truly fortunate and continue to be fortunate because I'm still playing, I'm still working as a musician, and I'm still teaching.

Q: Okay. Where did you live in Baltimore at that time? I know you went to Morgan State University. Around what year was that?

Funn: Okay, I went to Morgan from 1970 to 1975. And upon graduation, I lived somewhat on the outskirts of Baltimore City in a development called Piney Ridge. They were apartments. I got married and from Piney Ridge I moved downtown to Druid Hill Avenue. That was at 2131 Druid Hill Avenue, which was a house that we had inherited from my mother's family.

By that time I had two kids and a dog and sometimes another dog. At that time I was playing with Gene Walker's band. As a matter of fact, I had just joined Gene Walker's band. I was working around town, along with teaching.

I remember when I was in college, I used to go down to the Block and I would play down on the Block during the summer. And it was funny because I would not get paid, but the advantage of doing that, we would play the same songs every night behind the same lady entertainers. And it was a thing, and I use that term loosely, and it was a thing where the audience would be more focused on the lady entertainer rather than the music. So it was like we had a chance to experiment with the tune. So I likened it to the old style jam sessions where you would go in there and try to play the tune, and then try to solo, and then somebody would come up and slice you up and embarrass you, and then you'd go home and practice, and come back and try it all over again. So here was a non-hostile environment where I was able to go down and play basically the same seven or eight tunes every night and change them around.

Because I remember we played one tune once as a swing tune. Then the next night we said, well, let's try it as a Latin tune. We tried it as a Latin tune, then we tried it as a ballad. And it got to be a lot of fun doing that.

Plus I got to meet a lot of the other older black musicians who were surviving on the Block because the majority of the clubs there had closed down. And by that time the Block was shrinking. I think it's like a block and a half long. I remember when the Block ran from where President Street is for a good four or five blocks.

From Druid Hill Avenue, I got divorced and I moved to the east side of Baltimore. As a matter of fact, I lived one block over from Johns Hopkins Hospital. Currently, through contacts, I've met a lot of contractors. There's a gentleman who is in charge of the Fine Arts Department at Bowie State. I'm talking about Dr. Clarence Knight. He was one of the gentleman who was playing in the Renaissance Orchestra, which was the house band at the Howard Theater.

Each black metropolis in the city had their own theater. I learned that when I was out on the road for two or three years doing this play. In New York you had the Apollo, in Baltimore you had the Royal Theater, and in Washington, D.C. you had the Howard Theater.

Dr. Clarence Knight was one of the musicians in that band. But he is now a contractor for a lot of the groups that come to the East Coast. So I'm able to still play behind groups like the Dells, the Temptations and the Four Tops.

Q: Okay. Do you know what year the Royal was closed down?

Funn: That was way before my time. I have only heard of the Royal Theater in conversations. And I came here in 1970. This gentleman named Tracy McCleary. I had the fortunate blessing to play in his band. And it's funny when I tell people I played in Tracy McCleary's band because they automatically equate it with that band back in the '30s and the '40s. They say, you don't look that old. I say, well, I didn't play with the band when it was at the Royal Theater. But he kept the band going. I think I played with Tracy up until about 'the 90s, and I think his health began to fail him. He's still around though because he's a trooper.

But I think one of the biggest mistakes they made was to tear the Royal Theater down and turn it into a parking lot. As I was saying earlier, every city had to have its own black theater where the black stars would come and perform. They have one in Georgia, they have one in Boston, they have one in New York, they have one in California, and I think that Baltimore's the only one that tore their theater down. It would be nice if they would rebuild it or find another large theater and revamp it because what I'm finding out is that we need to provide some kind of outlet for the kids who are coming up playing.

Because unfortunately there aren't enough places for the kids to play, and you don't want kids who are in high school going out and sitting in nightclubs where alcohol is being served. So a perfect avenue would be to renovate a couple of the old theaters which are now closed down, and just bus the senior citizens in on weekends, or either bus the kids to the senior citizens homes and perform for them.

Not only do you have to create an audience, but you have to create the musicians also.

Q: You're doing a lot of that here with the jazz band,

Funn: Yes. And I'm loving it, I'm loving it. Throughout the course of a jazz band rehearsal, I'm not only teaching them the music, but I'm teaching them improvisation, and I'm giving them the history of the music, and all of the anecdotes that I've read in books or that other musicians have taught me. Like the idea of Duke Ellington being able to sit in a car and have his baritone saxophone player drive him to a gig, and by the time he got to the end of the gig, he had composed an entire piece, parts for each person, get on the performance, and pass it out, and the band would play, and he wouldn't have to change a note.

I basically enjoy teaching kids how to play instruments, whether it be jazz or concert music or marching band music. Because it's one of the things that got me out of school, and it kept me out of trouble. Well, it didn't keep me totally out of trouble, but if I wasn't involved in music I'd be in a lot more trouble than what I got into.

Q: We all would have been.

Funn: Yes.

Q: So can you just talk about the jazz band here [at Dunbar High School]. I know we talked a little bit about how you perceived your teaching, but could you talk about how you started the program here?

Funn: When I came here there only about six instruments which worked, and the principal at that time was Miss Charlene Wing. I went to her and I asked her for money to have some instruments repaired. And I went around to various places in Baltimore, and I found some instruments that didn't work but could be repaired at a nominal cost. And the problem was I had to keep maintaining some income into the program, and what I had done before, when I was at Poly [Baltimore Polytechnic High School], I organized a jazz band and I got them to the point where they could go out and do professional performances for cabarets, for churches, for fraternities, sororities and board meetings.

It was amazing, because at Poly, once the alumni found out that there was a jazz band in existence at their alma mater, they had no problem hiring them and putting money back into the school and writing it off on taxes. And I said, wait a minute, this will work.

So basically what I did, I started organizing a jazz band here. I remember the first performance we did outside of the building was down at Lexington Market. We had three songs, *On Broadway, Satin Doll,* and *Little Darling.* And I remember it was during the Christmas season my first year here, and I had my sons with me. My oldest son, Kyle, plays trumpet, and my youngest son, Chris, plays bass. And they helped me out at that concert here.

We went down to Lexington Market and did about a good hour and a half of just those three tunes. My sons and I changed it around playing tunes on piano, like for example, I'd play piano and then I'd play bass, and then Kyle would play trumpet, and the audience loved it.

So after we got the money from Lexington Market, I invested that money back into the band by ordering more tunes which the band could play, because I started with easy tunes. Then the next tune I would order would be a little bit harder, a little bit harder, but I was fortunate enough to order tunes that people wanted to hear. Like *In the Mood, Satin Doll, A Train,* things which the paying crowd could identify with. I mean, it's all right doing something by Thad Jones and Charlie Mingus, but they aren't going to want to hear that at a dance.

Fortunately enough, good news travels quicker than bad, and as you well know, Baltimore is a word-of-mouth town. The word basically got around that here is a group of high school kids which is a affordable, plus if you make a donation to them it's tax deductible. We played churches, we've played the Meyerhoff [Symphony Hall]. We were fortunate enough to play with Wynton Marsalis at the Meyerhoff. We were a warmup group for Houston Person. We were invited to Frostberg to play for Maya Angelou when she was up there doing a lecture.

We just came back from West Virginia, where they treated us like Duke Ellington. I mean, as soon as we got off of the bus, they were taking pictures and the TV cameras were there interviewing the kids, and it was great. It was fantastic.

Q: It must be good for the kids as well.

Funn: Yes. As I was saying earlier, I'm not only teaching the kids the music, but I'm teaching them the idea that if somebody calls you for a performance on Wednesday, you wouldn't charge

them as much on Wednesday as you would on Friday. And it depends on where it is. Friday night at a church, you wouldn't charge them as much as Friday night at the Hyatt.

I told them be careful of churches because churches will have you come in and play every Sunday and say that it's your duty to God, and meanwhile the preacher, and the minister and the music director are going home with eight or nine hundred dollars a service.

I told them don't go into church and play one song for under eighty-five dollars per man. But it's basically a thing where I'm trying to instill in the kids all of those things that I learned, not so much as a teacher, but as a musician. Because there's a lot of short cuts as far as playing an instrument as far as soloing, knowing what to do. I had a lot of my mentors help me and guide me, and it was a gas. And I'm just trying to pass that on to the kids who are coming up through school.

Q: So how do you see the jazz community now? Obviously with the jazz band you participate in the community now, not just in Baltimore, as a whole, in America?

Funn: It tickles me how every five years or every ten years there's always a critic or somebody in a magazine or a TV show or a radio show that's talking about a resurgence of jazz. But to me jazz has never, ever died. It's a thing where people might think that it goes into hiding, but the jazz musicians are still playing.

For example, I think Ken Burns has done a lot with his tape, because he made jazz available to a lot of people that say, well, I don't like jazz. Not realizing that there's myriads of different kinds of jazz, just like there's different kinds of food. Just like, I'm not all that partial to Brussels sprouts, but I've learned how to eat asparagus. But if there's something else on the menu, I'll try that.

I don't ever see jazz going underground. I see the instances of performances going there. Which is one of the main reasons why I organized the jazz band because it gives me the opportunity to play with the kids, and it opened a new window for me as far as composition is concerned. I've composed about a good twenty tunes for the band to play. And the hardest one was the first tune.

And there's no thrill in the world like doing something, and passing it out to somebody, and hearing it. And, it's like, um, that, doesn't sound too bad. Then you do it again. And the next one sounds better and the next one sounds better, and then after about maybe a month or so, it's like, oh, I'm being prolific here. I'm composing and arranging.

But I don't see jazz ever going anywhere. Even during the rock and roll era, the jazz musicians were going into the studios. A lot of them were going to Las Vegas and were playing in house bands and hotel bands and going over to Europe.

So it's basically a thing that, it could always be better. It could always be better. I have a habit of going over to Washington, D.C. a lot on the weekends because my sons are over there playing. And my youngest son who plays bass, he's working from Wednesday through Sunday in some club on U Street, and my oldest son who plays trumpet, he's in a big band here and a couple of

big bands in Washington. Plus the two of them have a group which plays Wednesday night. So I'm spending a lot more time over there.

But if it's in Annapolis, I will go hear it. If it's in Richmond, I'll go hear it. If it's in Timbuck 6, I'll go hear it. But the jazz community can always be better. But it can't be better, not unless we create an audience for it and create musicians for it. I mean, there is an ignorance about it, and the only way of overcoming that ignorance is through educating the public, which is what I'm trying to do with the jazz band here.

We'll go out and play churches, we'll play senior citizens homes, we'll play down at the Convention Center for several conventions, and I've tried to explain to the kids that you have to be careful about going out and thinking that one gig is better than the other. Because I've told them these people who are in the senior citizens home, this is probably the only entertainment that they get in months. So if you can go in there and play *Stomping at the Savoy* and *A Train* and *In the Mood*, they would appreciate it because those are the songs they grew up on, and it brings back memories for them, which creates another audience for us.

But like I was saying before, the audience can always be better. It's like a kid who eats candy. He'll never, ever be able to get enough.

There's a gentleman in town. His name is Gene Walker. I'm fortunate enough to be in his band, and it was funny when I first went to the rehearsal, I was terrified. Because all of these are seasoned musicians, and they're playing things by Basie and Ellington and Thad Jones, and I said here I am this young punk out of college, and I was like terrified. So he puts me in the third trombone chair, and I got through the night by listening to the trombone player beside me, and I had a gentleman behind me playing trumpet, and he was like dead in my ear. It wound up being a gentleman named Roy McCoy. Since that night on, he and I have been the best of friends all the way up to his death this year.

Roy would always take the time to talk to you, show you certain things on the horn, and he always had a positive attitude. Always. He was never, ever down. Never, ever down. He was responsible for helping a lot of musicians also. But the one thing that amazed me about him is that he could come into a rehearsal where the band was really, oh awful, I mean like dog-vomit awful. He would pull his horn out and start playing, and all of a sudden the whole band would sound like a completely different band, and that basically instilled in me the idea that no matter what band you're playing in. If it's a polka band, if it's a swing band, if it's a rock band, you have to bring something to the table.

I would never say, well, I'm not playing with those cats because those cats can't play. It's the idea of going in there, and doing the best you can to make the entire group sound good. Which is what Roy McCoy basically did. I don't think I ever heard him say a bad thing about anybody. The most he would say is, "oh man, that cat, he ain't cool," and then he would leave it alone.

But as far as playing trumpet is concerned, oh master, master. Roy was like Clark Terry, whereas he could play two measures, and you'd close your eyes and say, that's Roy, because he had his own sound. He would take guys over to his house and give them lessons and show them things

about the embouchure. He was a beautiful cat. One of the mainstays of Baltimore. And I was fortunate in knowing him.

I worked with him from, known Roy since all the time I've been in Baltimore. Because knowing Roy lead me to Gene Walker, which lead me to Jimmy Wells, which opened up the flower for me.

Q: That's neat.

Funn: Yeah. Great cats.

Q: Well, I'm not exactly sure what other questions to ask you right now. Is there anything else that you can think of?

Funn: Not off hand. There was a club on North Avenue that a lot of the musicians would go to, to jam. It was called a sit-in night. I believe it was called the Bird Cage. That was the first club I went to when I came to Baltimore. There's a guy out at Morgan named Major Boyd, and he heard me playing trombone. And he said, "yeah, man, I want to take you to this jam session." You'd say oh nice. And I'm like, what? Here I am a boy just fresh out of the country and all that, and I'm going into this nightclub where there's smoke and alcohol being served. And I didn't do too bad.

There was a club on Pennsylvania Avenue called the Sphinx Club. I think it's still open. And of course there's the Royal Theater. But the thing is, I've tried to stay away from the nightclubs after getting out of college because I found out that a lot of times they will try to take advantage of you by having you coming in and playing all night, and if you go to the bar and ask for a drink, they'll charge you the full price.

There's another club here in town called the Haven, which is doing good as far as promoting jazz. There's a club on Gwynn Oak called the Sportsmens Lounge that used to be real popular on Saturdays where the guys would go in and have jam sessions.

But as far as the music is concerned, I just hope that it will live on forever. The thing which bothers, well, it doesn't actually bother me because I should be doing something about it also, and I'm in the process of doing it. Something should be done about the legacy of Chick Webb in Baltimore and John Kirby. If you go over to Washington, D.C., they have a Duke Ellington School for the Arts. They've got Duke Ellington painted on the side of a building in the neighborhood where he grew up. They have streets named after him.

Chick Webb is the legacy to Baltimore to what Duke was to Washington, D.C. I think we have a school named after him, and we have a rec center named after him, but I'm in the process now of trying to find arrangements by him and transcribing things by him so that we can do a lot more of his tunes. Because he's basically mentioned in the book as the house band at the Savoy, and he was a fantastic drummer who discovered Ella Fitzgerald in spite of his deformity as far as his back was concerned.

So I guess I'm an educator and a musician at heart, in hand. But I think something needs to be done about that because there's a lot of great talent which has come out of Baltimore. I mean, you got Lady Day, John Kirby the bass player, Cab Calloway, Gary Thomas and Gary Bartz, Lonny Liston Smith, Wilmer Wise, Jimmy Wells, Albert Daley the piano player, Donald Bailey the bass player.

Maybe it's something about the town. I don't know.

Q: It's quite possible.

Funn: But you're not gonna get me to say that on tape.

END OF INTERVIEW